

## Standardizing Bureau of Indian Affairs Aviation Program

In 2015, the capabilities of Indian Country's Aviation Program went airborne thanks to the Bureau of Indian Affairs' national commitment to invest in high performance aircraft and well-trained firefighters dedicated to protecting Indian Country's trust assets.

Firefighter modules that work on and support helicopters are called helitack crews. The BIA provides equipment and training for seven Helitack programs nationally, one of which is the Mission Valley Helitack crew, based out of Ronan, Montana. Since the 1970's, the Flathead Agency-Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CS&KT) have hosted the MVH crew to provide wildland fire response to 3.3 million acres of land that is managed by multiple jurisdictions across western Montana.



Figure 1: Mission Valley Helitack-Crewmembers carry a bucket back to its cargo area after using it to put out a fire that burned a hay field on the Flathead Reservation. Photo by Todd Couture, MVH Crew Supervisor

Due to the amount of flying and risk helitack crews are exposed to throughout the extended fire season, the Aviation Program invests in high performance aircraft. Known for its dependability, the AS350 B3 helicopter is able to carry heavier payloads, faster, at higher elevations. This translates into greater capacity to safely move water, firefighters and supplies to the fire line. In high elevations, like Montana where the air is thinner and it's harder to fly, high performance aircraft is particularly important to the MVH crew.

In 2015, the Aviation Program established career ladders to identify the qualifications needed to move from an entry level firefighter to an assistant fire management officer. To reach these qualifications, Central Office provides funding to all seven helitack modules, CS&KT included, to provide training. The training is required annually so firefighters maintain their qualifications. This investment ultimately reduces the risk firefighters are exposed to over time and helps crewmembers reach their next career goals.

When firefighters receive training and are able to advance their qualifications, crews become more valuable and diversified resources for Indian Country. The MVH crew carries seven CS&KT tribal employees and five USFS employees from the Lolo National Forest. The 12-member interagency crew carries a Type 3 Incident Commander, Type 1 and 2 helibase managers, crew and squad bosses. There is even an individual working towards qualifying as an Air Attack Group Supervisor! Furthermore, each season, the module hosts up to three trainees every two weeks to work on helicopter-related taskbooks.

One way helitack crews gain a lot of fire experience is by working in multiple geographic areas that have different vegetation types. This is achieved by moving resources to when and where they are needed, throughout Indian Country. Beginning in June, the MVH crew is typically mobilized to the southwest to support tribes and agencies experiencing heavy fire activity. When the monsoon season slows fire activity in August, the crew migrates north again when Montana, Oregon and Washington usually see increased fire activity. In total, the crew sees an average flight time of 280 hours a year, making it a very experienced flight crew.

Experience and training are two components needed for firefighters to advance their fire management careers. The last and equally important requirement is education. An emerging program the BIA, Office of Trust Services (OTS), is developing is the Pathways Internship Program. Targeted to help college students

working towards obtaining degrees in natural resource management, the Program provides paid internships, professional work experience and position qualifications needed to advance in the fire management program. More information about the OTS Internship Program can be found at:  
<http://www.bia.gov/WhoWeAre/BIA/iayouth/index.htm> .

High performance aircraft, training, experience and education, combined with strategic leadership is helping the Mission Valley Helitack and other BIA wildland fire management programs reach new heights. Watch for them in the year ahead. They go where the fire does!